

Emitt Soldin

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Oral History Project
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Interviewed by: Jim King and Bruce Conant

Jim: We are at the home of Emitt Soldin in Anchorage, Alaska, along with Bruce Conant and Bill Floyd. We are just starting to tell tales about the turbine Beaver and I just reminded Emitt that we already have “other” versions of this.

Emitt: Oh, yes. Everybody has their own way of remembering things.

Bill: So, was that the first one that had the Garret's put on it?

Emitt: Yes. McKinnon put the PT-6's on all of them and Smitty wanted the Garret's and he had a good reason. It was a better engine in a lot of ways. He got approval from the government and they built that turbo-Super Goose. The Aleutian Goose, which is here in Anchorage right now. The government sold it and Theron's son, Terry, is the one that is taking care of it for the owner. Terry flew it a lot, so he knows the airplane.

Jim: Terry watched it being born!

Emitt: When we first came up here in 1955, they sent me out to fly in Bristol Bay. Theron and Terry (Theron's son) came out with me. Terry was very small at that time. He would stand in the middle on the floor and his nose would just barely get above the instruments. Wherever we went, Terry was there too. Now he is check airman on 737's for Alaska Airlines.

Jim: I have done about 12 of these interviews and everybody apologizes for their memory. Everybody is in the same boat, I guess.

Emitt: Smitty is just tremendous with his memory. He sat here for about an hour the other day and we just had more fun discussing the old days.

The Goose, I flew longer in time, but the least in hours. I flew the DC-3 the least in time, but the longest in hours. Of course, you are in a DC-3 6-8 hours but with the Goose, it was 30 minutes, another 30 minutes. You are up and down all the time.

Jim: I remember you rattling back and forth to Brooks Lake out of King Salmon.

Emitt: I used to go up there and wash my airplane down! Long after I was flying for Fish and Wildlife, I flew out of King Salmon for a year and a half for Richfield Oil Co. I would take my three kids to Brooks with me. They are big monsters now. Sometime in the next few days, I will be having my first great grandson. I already know what he is going to look like – just look at these sonogram pictures here!

I got to thinking last night of some of the old names – Roger Allen, is he still living?

Jim: He lives in Colorado. He was living in Washington. He visits with Hank Hansen and Ed Whitsell. Hank and Ed are both in Oak Harbor, Washington. They live in the same retirement place. They kind of look out for each other and visit back and forth.

Emitt: Did you ever know Gordy Anderson? He worked for us as a mechanic in Juneau. I worked with him years later for FAA. He just came up from Squim about a month ago.

Bruce: How about Al Kropf?

Emitt: He bit the dust years ago – smoking! I kept telling him to quit. He died January 13, about 4 years ago. The circulation went away on his legs. They wanted to operate but Al said, “no, leave them alone.”

Jim: John Klingbeal used to smoke Camels. I think they got to him too.

Emitt: Did you know John Klingbeal?

Jim: Well, there were two of them, one was a pilot, John Klingbile, and one was a Fish and Wildlife Agent, John Klingbeal, who started in Sitka.

Emitt: Klingbeal was a renegade. I was in Sitka when he lived there. He was a neat guy but he was a game bandit so they hired him – like Ray Tremblay! Ray was the banter of the Kuskokwim. They made the best enforcement people we ever had!

Jim: Tremblay was with us the other day.

Emitt: How about Mel Monson?

Jim: Mel died about 3 years ago. He was in Juneau. He went to Seattle for heart by-pass. I think that was successful but he caught pneumonia.

Emitt: How about Fred Woolstad? He was up working the North Slope when he died. Sid Morgan – where is he?

Jim: He is still in Juneau and he has a bunch of great grandchildren. Sid has had some heart problems but he seems to have things under control.

Bruce: So, how did you get started with Fish and Wildlife?

Emitt: It started way back in the 40's when I met Clarence Rhode. He was flying for Coastal and I was working for Ellis as a mechanic. After the War, I stayed two years in California from 1946-1948, then I decided to come back to Alaska. I was born and raised in Skagway so I am originally Alaskan. I learned to fly in Juneau in 1941. Clarence Walters had a school down there and taught me to fly so aviation was my life from the time I was 16.

I was working for Coastal as a mechanic/pilot flying the Bellanca and Sea Bee. Clarence was looking for mechanic/pilots in 1953-54. I went to work at the FWS hangar in Juneau with Bob Meeks. Jim Hickey was flying out of Bristol Bay and Al Kropf was flying out of Juneau. We had lots of work. It was so much fun, we rebuilt our own airplanes there. We didn't have a fancy hangar like they had up here in Anchorage. We had that old left over Pan American hangar. Pan American built it in the late 30's. There was a little tower they built on the corner of it. They could stand up there and watch the airplanes coming in, in bad weather.

When I learned to fly in 1941, June 1st, the biggest thing there at the airport was the Pan American hangar. They would have Lockheed Electra's, and Load Stars, and pull the noses in the hangar to keep the engines warm. One time, Pan Am came in with a DC-3. There was a high wind one night. It tipped the plane up on one wing and bent the wing a bit.

In 1953 I went to work at the FWS hangar and the next year, Clarence checked me out in the Goose and shipped me off to King Salmon. I took 709, which was Kroppie's airplane. It was almost like it was his. He had it out at Kodiak for years. I took 709 up there to be sent out to Kodiak. They gave me 789 and I went out to Bristol Bay. Theron and Terry came out with me for about a week. Theron checked me out in all the different bays and rough water out in the ocean, and the different spots to land in the river, then he went home.

About a month later, he said, “hey, I have another airplane for you.” He brought an old D-18 Beach out. I did some high altitude photo work with it. Do you remember Dick Strady? He was out there then. He was out in Bristol Bay the first year I was there.

Jim: So you stayed there at the fishery station? They had good meals and things there as I recall.

Emitt: We had the neatest camp out there at King Salmon. Mark Meyer was kind of the boss. He took care of the hiring and the firing. He would always get good people. We had some of the best cooks. Some of them were chefs. He would get a crew of construction workers together for the summer work.

One year, in 1959, we had a project out at Karluk where we brought in a whole warehouse and bunkhouse material. I hauled it to Karluk Lake from Old Harbor. It was just a 15-minute flight. I would stuff that old Goose full of wood and away we would go! I spent about a month hauling all that camp out there. We lived on Camp Island. There was no Fish and Wildlife cabin there. It was just a research cabin, not much bigger than my living room and kitchen. We lived in that old place for about a month. Mark, Louey, another guy from Juneau – just a good team. Jim Stanton was with us. He was just a roust-about, not a biologist or anything. We spent the month of October over there in 1959 putting that place together.

A few years ago, Jeff, the guy that died with his girlfriend, was flying out there with 789, the same old airplane, the same old place. Jeff would come home and tell me what he was doing, etc.

Jim: You would be out there in the summer time and then back in Southeast in the wintertime?

Emitt: My first summer of 1955, I was out at Bristol Bay and at the end of the season, I came back to Juneau with my airplane. Then the next year, they sent me to Ketchikan.

The airplane that I had then was 781. I flew out of Ketchikan for the summer of 1956 on fishery matters, law enforcement, or whatever was needed. John Wendler was there then. Johnny was over in the federal building and we were in the research lab there in Ketchikan. They had a little boat dock right there in the harbor. That's where we kept the airplane.

The next year, 1957, they built a ramp north of Ketchikan and I kept the airplane at the ramp after that. Stan Swanson was the State ADF&G director at one time. He was a fishery biologist. He used to haul fry. He would hatch these fish and bring them down in 5-gallon buckets with a little aquarium pump with a 6-volt battery. He would stack a whole bunch of these 5-gallon buckets in there with these little tiny fishes and ice cubes and a little tube in each one and he would turn on the battery. Later on they used oxygen to oxygenate the water. We would go down to these lakes and dump these fish out.

Jim: What do you think happened there that caused Bob Meek to crash?

Emitt: There was never a question. Bob just cut it too close on fuel supply. That particular airplane, 742, the left fuel gauge was always very erratic. You never knew what it was telling you. You would have to understand the mechanics of it. The gas tank sets up in the wing and there are two lines that come together. The lines come in to the bottom of the tank. On the top of the tank is a drain that goes to the rest of the system. The fuel gauge is in this line, just a plain old water glass gauge. The little elbow on the bottom would plug up with dirt so it wouldn't give you a proper reading, no matter what happened.

Later we made it so that each time you drained your fuel to get rid of water, you also cleaned that line out. Bob thought he had fuel in there but he should have known better. He wasn't conscientious enough. He was real bashful. He was in Sitka with George Kellis and his girlfriend, who was a pianist. She was going over to the Island for back surgery. Bob went over to Sitka and they decided to take a run up to Pelican. Then it

was Sunday. Bob was real bashful about bothering the fueling people on Sunday so he didn't re-fuel.

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We are talking about the Grumman accident with Bob Meeks and the fisheries guys.

Emitt: Dick Schuman was the Kodiak bear specialist. It was a sad situation. Bob could have gassed up at Sitka on Sunday but he didn't want to bother anybody. They decided they wanted to go to Pelican. Under normal scheduling, there would have been no problem. They went to Pelican and came back. If they had just come right straight to Anchorage that would have been fine. They were heading for Juneau but on their way from Sitka, they wanted to go by Pillar's Bay. Pillar's Bay is southwest of Kake. That would have been all right except that by the time they got to King Salmon Bay, they decided they wanted to look at the stream.

All this time, Bob has an empty tank on the right and he had fuel showing on the left but it was trap fuel. It wasn't a true fuel. He made a turn around in King Salmon Bay and the engines quit. There was no way to get to water. He wound up just going right into the trees and rolled it upside down. Gus Gunslinger was in the right seat. Bob said, "hey, we're going in." Gus put his arms down and laid against the panel. There was no stick on that side. Bob got the stick right in his chest. He lived until morning. It was amazing that Dean Goodwin was just coming back at the time and he saw this guy on the beach in the evening. He stopped and picked him up and it was Gus and brought him into town. Then Clarence called and told me and Jim Hickey to get out there in the Goose. Bob was gone. The rescue crew went out and picked him up.

Jim: Was Bob one of the old Coastal pilots?

Emitt: Bob Meeks was a mechanic for Alaska Coastal. Clarence had a habit of taking on deadbeats, like me. Bob was an excellent mechanic and he had a pilot's license so Clarence hired him. If there was something to be done, you could count on Bob to be there to do it, no matter what day or what time it was. He was just a real faithful guy but he was not really a polished pilot. No matter how long he lived, he would never have been a polished pilot. He checked me out in the Widgeon. He was more scared of that than the airplane. He didn't let me have a feeling of confidence in his ability. To me it was a lot easier to fly than the Sea Bee.

Jim: I don't know of any other accident, really in Smitty's aircraft division where you could say that it was that kind of a serious accident that killed people.

Emitt: I brought 709 up, sent it out to Kodiak and FWS hired Bill Harvey(??) to fly it. He was a good pilot. He flipped it on its back on a soft field out of Kodiak.

Clarence was a good pilot but sometimes, he was braver than he should have been. That's what happened up in the North. He just wasn't used to the fact that he might have to turn around. I flew with him several times and he checked me out in the goose. I kind of had the feeling that he was braver than he was smart. One day we were going to Cordova in the D-18 Beach. We went down to Seward and the weather was not too good but we went IFR. Clarence was a good IFR pilot. We left Seward, climbed up and headed for Cordova, about 3,000 feet, IFR. I'm looking at the map and thinking, umm, this doesn't look very comfortable. The mountains in front of us were 3,000 feet! I said, "hey, boss, shouldn't we be a little higher?" He said, "yes, I guess we should be" so he pulled up another 1,000 feet. He never put everything together properly for IFR flying.

I remember him leaving out of Juneau in that old D-18 headed directly for Fairbanks. One time he got iced up before he got to Yakutat so he turned around and came back which was a blessing. But Clarence was, what I would say, one of the pioneering pilots. We got a lot of dead pioneer pilots but they pushed the envelope and that's what made the whole thing possible. They pushed the envelope.

It's easy to look back and say they shouldn't have done it, but they did. We searched for Clarence for weeks. We were probably within about two miles of where he was found. He got so totally destroyed. He was flying up the valley and if he had been on the right hand side, if he had been cautious and said maybe he should turn around, but Clarence I know, he went up the valley and he was going to go through it. He was found 21 years later.

Bruce: Al Kropf was a polished pilot, wasn't he?

Emitt: Kroppie was very good, safe, and conscientious. Sometimes, a lot of people thought he was over cautious. I flew with him out of Juneau and up here in Anchorage. After he retired, he built a little airplane. He made part of it in my garage. He had a lot of Coast Guard time. He flew PBM's and PBY's in the North Atlantic. He flew the Goose and the D-18 Beach for Fish and Wildlife.

Bruce: Mel Monson told a story about him working on the engines and he wouldn't have a spot of grease on his uniform.

Emitt: He always had to have those military-type clothes. He just couldn't seem to get away from that. He was a terrific mechanic. He built that airplane himself. It was the sweetest flying little airplane. I did the welding and a few other things. He did all the woodwork, all the layout, collecting the parts. That was the neatest little airplane. After he died, his brother sold it. I wish I had known because at that time, I would have bought it. He sold it for nothing – about \$7,000. The engine was worth that. I flew it 25 hours. I flew the FAA required time off it. Kroppie was a little bit funny in that way. I don't know why. He always had an excuse.

There would be times when he would check the weather and he would just not want to fly and he would just cancel out. A time or two, we would get upset with that. If there was a reason, fine. I took it for its first flight and I finished the 25 FAA required hours out.

We had a little problem at first. He didn't build enough carburetor heat into it. In fact, there was none. I took off one day out of International Airport and I had just gotten in the air and it started sputtering. I called the tower and told them that I might have an engine problem. They told me I was clear to land whatever way I wanted. I got a little more altitude, turned downwind, then I landed and pulled over and then I realized that we didn't have enough carburetor heat. We fixed that and never had a problem after that. Kroppie was a perfectionist. A lot of the machine work that was done on it, he did himself. One of our mechanics, Herman Ruess, the finest machinist, showed Kroppie how to do it.

Bruce: You must have some good "Smitty" stories, don't you?

Emitt: Theron was also a perfectionist. Nothing pushed Smitty. When Bob Meeks crashed, Smitty came down to Juneau to investigate the wreckage. Smitty, Gordon Anderson, and I went over there to King Salmon Bay and we set up a tent. We spent about three days right there at the wreckage. Smitty went through the carburetors, he went through everything, but we didn't do anything until 10:00 in the morning. You didn't push Smitty. He didn't make any wild decisions. There was no list on what we were going to do. Gordon and I would just do whatever Smitty wanted done.

Another time Smitty took me out to Bristol Bay. We had a huge load of radios, etc. to set up camp out there. It was an extremely windy day. The waves on a lake are tougher than they are on the ocean because on the lake, they are choppy. On the ocean they will be modified by other overlapping waves and you can find a soft spot but in a lake, you can't. We were right at the lower end, downwind, right at the outlet. I didn't really want to go but Smitty said, "well, let's go." So I put the coal to it. It didn't hurt anything but the radio rack up in front went down through the floor and we got a wrinkle in the top of the cabin. I got the sucker out. Smitty wasn't a pamperer.

We had the old *Dennis Winn* sitting out there in the Bay. There was some sort of a panic and we needed to get out there to it. It was a little bit rough but Smitty said, "well, let's

go.” So we did. I learned a lot about the ocean from Smitty; where you could land and where you couldn’t. He showed me how to set up for landing and he told me that when I felt it was right, just chop the power and do it, so we did. We pulled up to the *Dennis Winn*. There was something that they gave to us to take to shore. But then there was the other side of the story.

The *Dennis Winn* was making a flat spot, but if we take off, we are going to have to hit the rear end of the *Dennis Winn*. We pulled off to the side and then he showed me how you have waves coming and they cancel each other. You could be set up and everything ready to go so you pick the spot where it pretty much cancels and you can see – it might be rough where you are but you can see that it is going to be fairly smooth. We rammed the power to it and then as soon as you get it in the right condition and get 45 knots, hit the flaps. Smitty probably taught me more in that two weeks and if it hadn’t been for his assistance, I might have had to learn the hard way or not at all. He was always so meticulous when we were searching for Clarence. He always got things organized.

Jim: I was stationed in Fairbanks. I was roaming around. I flew with Tom Wardleigh for awhile and Tony Schultz from Wein Airlines. I spent quite a few days with him.

Emitt: I could tell you some stories about Tom Wardleigh. One day, Clarence checked me out in the Goose in Juneau. Then I brought 709 up and had to get a twin engine sea rating. Tom gets me in that airplane and we go to Birchwood – for practice. We were downwind with the gear down and he said, “let’s see if this thing will land with no power.” So Tom pulled both throttles back – well that got my attention! All you have to do is keep your speed up and hope you can get to the field. It was really interesting. Tom could always pull something different and that is why he was such a good instructor. He always had a little different quirk that he would pull on you. He is one of those that really made the outfit work too. Guys like Tom, Jerry Lawhorn in maintenance, Clara in the office.

Jim: That was certainly a great operation.

Emitt: Whether we were in Juneau or in Anchorage, we were a team, because Clarence was our boss. Clarence was very well respected. In fact, that's why I went to work for Fish and Wildlife. I knew him back when I was working for Ellis. Clarence was flying the Lockheed for Coastal out of Juneau, then later he became head of Fish and Wildlife, then I said, "remember me?"

Jim: When a bunch of us get to talking, we do talk about accidents and close calls but that was a pretty salty capable flight operation. There weren't many bad things that happened.

Emitt: Very few incidents. Just Clarence and Bob Meeks. Clarence was too generous, in a sense. He put too much trust in Bob, but Bob needed somebody over him. Bob was in charge in Juneau. If Kroppie had been in charge, he would have demanded more finesse than Bob but Bob didn't know the difference. Bob was just a greasy mechanic; just exactly the opposite of Kroppie. Kroppie could go to work with grease falling off all over the place and come out like he had just gotten dressed. Bob went in looking like a greasy mechanic and he came out looking like one.

Jim Hickey was a neat kid but he was temperamentally not quite suited for dealing with the fisheries people and the game people.

Jim: I don't think I ever met him. You know on the Clarence Rhode accident, Ray Woolford looked at the accident report after they found the airplane. They found a pistol belt in the left seat. There were no remains in there. All the bones had been pulled out, etc. but Woolford looked at that and he said, "well, Clarence never wore a pistol, Fredrickson wore a pistol." Then we got to thinking, would it be possible that Clarence had maybe gotten sick or something and Fredrickson was trying to get him out of there. What he was thinking was Clarence maybe was in the right seat and Fredrickson was trying to fly the airplane out of there. That always opened the discussion of whether or not Clarence really did do it or not.

Emitt: Bob Meeks always carried a pistol in that pocket. Whenever he flew the Goose, he would have the pistol there. He also had a set of binoculars hanging on the panel somewhere. There is nothing more worthless than a Grumman Goose on cross-country than a frigin pair of binoculars. You can't see sh--. I carried binoculars too because I was told to. You just can't see out of an airplane with binoculars. If you want to see something, just go to it and look at it.

Jim: I had a pair of binoculars when I was flying with Tony Shultz. I had them around my neck. We hit a bump and I got a pretty strong punch in the chin so I never wore binocs in the airplane around my neck again.

Emitt: If you were 10 miles away from logs in the water, and you put those binocs on, you might be able to tell that it was a ship and not a floating log. That is about as much good as those things are. The Navy always had binoculars – all the Captains had binoculars and I guess they were looking for a mass on the horizon. We always had those Navy compasses in our Goose's. Those were the neatest things but we weren't navigating like that. Most of the time I was looking down at the ground, most frequently at rivers.

Bruce: The old hangar used to have a bunch of glider towropes. Do you remember that?

Emitt: Oh, yes. We got them surplused. We had tons of them. They had a wire down the middle of them with a little plug on each end. We had so much surplus stuff. I remember one time we got a box half as big as this kitchen and in there was a whole bunch of dry 12-volt aircraft batteries. One time we got a box about the same size with just mechanic tools so needless to say – well, “I think I still have mine.”

We got a bunch of Ranger engines. Mark Meyer picked up more stuff for us. He would see something that he thought that we would want and he would put in for it. One time, he had a government surplus list and there was a winch with a cable. He thought we

could use it out in Bristol Bay to pull our boats up out of the water so he applied for it. One day they notified him that the flat car was on the side of the storage shed and to come pick it up. It was about the size of a locomotive! He got me a surplus jeep one time for my use out at King Salmon.

Jim: Holger Larsen was really working the surplus yards too.

Emitt: A lot of us did. We would get boxes and boxes here in Anchorage. One time we got a bunch of miscellaneous things and among one bunch was titanium. They were about 16-inch square, half-inch thick. I just gave mine away the other day.

Bruce: How about Bill Pinnett. Did you know him?

Emitt: Oh, yes, I sure did. He was a good mechanic too. I watched him build that Stagger Wing Beach. He had two of them. One caught fire in the hangar. He was a neat guy. He had a gravy train when he was out at King Salmon. He retired out there.

Jim: I used to get out there every spring. He would want me to go in and look at his airplane. For about 4 years, he was working on a Stagger Wing. I would have to look at his progress every year.

Emitt: He did beautiful work. I would just marvel at his ability. Bill was one of my favorite people.

Jim: That was the cleanest airplane. There wasn't a crease or fingerprint on it anywhere. His workmanship on the wood was something else.

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